

**DIRECTION OF  
TRAVEL**

**DRAFT SELF-  
ASSESSMENT**

**2008/09**

NOVEMBER 2008

*Epping Forest District Council*



## 1. CONTEXT

**This section of the self-assessment should report any significant changes to the local challenges and opportunities the Council is now facing, to ensure that the assessment generally takes account of the local context.**

Commentary	Evidence source
<p>The Council is facing considerable pressure for development within the Epping Forest District, as a result of the adoption of the East of England Plan in May 2008, which proposes urban extensions to the east, south and west of Harlow, and extensions to the north of Harlow within the East Herts district. Whilst the provision of affordable housing remains a key priority for the Council, with some 4,300 people currently registered on its housing waiting list, the retention of the special character of the district continues to be an issue of significant strategic importance to the authority.</p> <p>Progress on the development of a replacement Local Development Scheme for the district has been delayed, subject to further discussions with the Government Office for the East of England to determine the options available to deliver the policy requirements of the East of England Plan. As a result, progress on the preparation of the Core Strategy has also been delayed, although technical work to create a robust evidence base had continued in partnership with other relevant authorities where necessary.</p> <p>The current financial climate is having an effect on the economy of the district. The housing market has slowed significantly, and this will increase the likelihood of repossessions and potential homelessness. Given that the working population of the district generally out-commutes to London, the impact of the current financial climate on the financial services sector may also manifest itself in terms of an increase in local unemployment. The Council has therefore recently committed to a number of measures to assist small businesses, such as the payment of undisputed invoices within twenty days, the award of contracts of sizes that are accessible to small businesses and, where value for money can still be achieved, that priority to be given to local suppliers and contractors in terms of the procurement of goods and services.</p> <p>The Government has issued a legal direction requiring the Council to submit a Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan by 30 September 2009. The authority is currently consulting residents and other stakeholders on options for meeting current and future requirements for gypsy and traveller site provision. Although the Council always intended to include the accommodation needs of the travelling community in wider consultation arising from the more general targets for housing and employment</p>	<p>East of England Plan</p> <p>Minutes of Council Meeting (28.10.08)</p> <p>Local Area Agreement 2008-2011 - 'Story of Place'</p>

provision set out in the East of England Plan, the Government direction requires the Council to deal separately with gypsy and traveller issues by publishing a stand-alone plan. This is a challenging matter for the Council and its residents and other stakeholders, and the consultation is proving to be highly contentious with local people and is placing considerable strain on the Council's Forward Planning Team responsible for the development of the required Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan.

The Epping Forest District faces a number of socio-economic issues in relation to matters such as health inequalities, rural transport, and educational attainment levels. These issues have been identified in the 'Story of Place' developed by the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership, which formed part of the development of the second Local Area Agreement for Essex. While moving in the right direction, three of the six state secondary schools in the district have experienced periods of poor performance and have been placed into special measures in recent years.

Despite the success of a new officer structure completed during 2008, the Council has unfortunately experienced levels of long-term sickness absence amongst key senior staff over the last six months, most notably within the Housing and Planning and Economic Development Directorates where a number of 'acting up' arrangements are currently in place. Additionally, the Assistant Director of Planning and Economic Development (Policy and Conservation) post became vacant early in 2008, and recent recruitment activity has proved unsuccessful. The failure to recruit to this post has also placed further additional burden on the Forward Planning team.

In view of the unprecedented turbulence currently being experienced by financial markets, the Cabinet has been updated on the Council's Treasury Management Strategy, its investment position, and the risks currently being faced. In order to examine ways of enhancing controls in the current environment. An audit of the authority's treasury management function has consequently been brought forward in the Internal Audit Business Plan for 2008/09.

Although levels of overall crime are low within the district, the Council, through working within the Safer Communities Partnership, needs to deal with issues such as the fear and perception of crime. The Council needs also to address the concerns raised within the Encams Local Environmental Quality Report and the Audit Commission's inspection of Environmental Services in respect of standards of street scene cleanliness and the delivery of components of the waste management service.

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## 2. WHAT HAS THE COUNCIL SOUGHT TO ACHIEVE

**This section of the self-assessment should report any changes that the Council has made to its key ambitions, priorities and performance targets in the last year, referring to published documents where available.**

**The content of this section of the self-assessment, and other relevant information about the Council's improvement priorities, will inform findings against KLoE 1.1**

Commentary	Evidence source
<p>The Council has reinforced its key commitment to retain Council Tax increases in line with inflation, and has developed a four-year medium-term financial strategy to this end. Despite the potential loss of investment income arising from the likelihood of lower interest rates, the Council has retained this key priority and will seek to achieve this through good financial management and efficiency arrangements.</p> <p>The Cabinet adopted a range of specific priorities for 2008/09 at its meeting in June 2008. Progress against these priorities for the first six months of the year is to be reviewed by the Cabinet at its meeting in December 2008, and the continued achievability and relevance of the priorities will be kept under review. As an example, one specific priority requires the Council to undertake a review of its depot facilities within the district, with a view to rationalising existing provision and the disposal of sites considered surplus to requirements. In view of the current financial climate, it may not be appropriate to pursue this priority at the present time.</p> <p>The Council has developed a new set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for 2008, arising from the introduction of the new National Indicator (NI) Set. The KPIs are crucial to the Council's core business and its corporate priorities, and comprise a mixture of NIs, Local Performance Indicators (LPIs) (a number of which are former statutory Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPis)), and other indicators that the Council has 'had regard to' in the second Local Area Agreement (LAA) for Essex. The aim of the KPIs is to focus improvement on key areas and achieve comparable performance with that of the top performing local authorities (where appropriate), and to then maintain or improve further on that level of performance. In adopting the KPIs for 2008/09, the Cabinet set a target for at least 75% to achieve target</p>	<p>Medium Term Financial Strategy</p> <p>Cabinet Minutes (9.6.08)</p>

performance by the end of the year. Annual improvement plans are produced for the majority of the KPIs, setting out actions to be implemented in order to achieve or maintain target performance, and to reflect year on year changes in service delivery. In view of the corporate importance attached to the KPIs, the improvement plans are considered and agreed by the Corporate Executive Forum. Progress in achieving target performance in respect of the KPIs continues to be reported to the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel and the relevant Portfolio Holder at the conclusion of each quarter.

The Council has developed its draft Safer, Cleaner, Greener Strategy, as part of its current key initiative to deliver safer streets, cleaner public spaces and a greener environment. The Strategy is supported by the adoption of a range of environmental related targets (waste, streets, carbon footprint, crime etc) within the second Essex LAA and the authority's suite of KPIs for 2008/09.

### 3. HOW ARE IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES BEING DELIVERED?

**This section of the self-assessment should report any changes that have occurred over the last year relating to how the Council delivers its improvement priorities.**

**The content of this section of the self-assessment will inform findings against KLoE 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4. The Audit Commission's assessment of value for money for the year will inform KLoE 1.4**

Commentary	Evidence source
<p>The Council Plan for 2006 to 2010 is the authority's key strategic planning document, setting out service delivery priorities over a four year period, and its strategic themes match those set out in the Community Strategy for the district. Although the Council Plan provides the overall context for resource allocation, the Council recognises that strategic and customer led priorities may change or be enhanced during the life of the Plan. Progress against the key priorities and objectives set out in the Council Plan is reviewed on an annual basis, and work will shortly commence on the initial development of a new corporate plan to take the authority forward from 2010.</p>	<p>Report of LSP Away Day ICT Review Case Study Choice Based Lettings Case Study</p>
<p>The Council has implemented a new officer structure designed to meet the challenges it faces over the medium-term. The first stages of this restructure involved the appointment of a single Chief Executive, a Deputy Chief Executive and five directors covering Corporate Support Services, Finance and ICT,</p>	<p>Value For Money Analysis Tool Active Health Project Case Study</p>

Environment and Street Scene, Housing, and Planning and Economic Development. Subsequently, the establishment of, and appointments to, Assistant Director positions were made to enable the Council to build the capacity required to meet the challenges of improving performance and meeting community needs. The final stages of this process were completed in February 2008 and involved the determination and approval of restructure proposals for the remaining elements within the five Directorates, the Offices of the Chief Executive (including the Internal Audit Unit) and Deputy Chief Executive. The re-structure achieved an overall saving of £500,000, as part of the Council's 3% efficiency savings for 2008/09. Savings from the top management element of the restructure contributed to the Council's objective of setting a budget for 2008/09 with a Council Tax increase no higher than the rate of inflation, and efficiency gains arising from the restructure overall were re-invested towards enhancing and extending the delivery of front line services, particularly those concerning the range of environmental and street scene issues.

The Council has taken a proactive approach to its contribution to the development of the second Essex Local Area Agreement (LAA), which commenced in April 2008, in order to ensure that the LAA reflects relevant local priorities. The Council and the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) were fully engaged in the development of the 'story of place' designed to inform the Epping Forest content of the new LAA, and both organisations 'have regard to' a wide range of key priorities and indicators within the agreement. Actions and targets designed to achieve LAA priorities are being delivered through the LSP action plans.

After a difficult period with the absence of the Chairman and Co-ordinator of the LSP, the Leader of the Council now chairs the partnership. A recruitment exercise is currently being conducted for an LSP Manager, to be responsible to the Deputy Chief Executive. A successful facilitated 'away day' day in October 2008 helped refocus the LSP and ensure that it can be considered 'fit for purpose' with respect to the refresh of the Sustainable Community Strategy and its linkages to the Local Development Framework. This is helping to strengthen partnership working and the delivery of the targets within the second Essex LAA.

The Council has engaged Capita to review and benchmark its existing ICT service, and to make recommendations on the strategic direction and future provision of ICT services within the authority. The outcomes from this review are set out as a case study forming an appendix to this self-assessment.

Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan – Consultation Document

Local Area Agreement 2008-2011 - 'Story of Place'

The completion and implementation of the Council's new officer structure resulted in the establishment of a new Environment and Street Scene Directorate, and the appointment of Assistant Directors with designated geographical responsibilities. The corporate 'Safer, Cleaner and Greener' initiative has since been introduced, to enable environmental issues to be dealt with as quickly as possible. The initiative includes a new Environmental and Neighbourhoods Team, as well as expanded roles for technical and enforcement officers to encompass the Cleaner Neighbourhoods legislation and the results of the Rogers Review of enforcement. The Safer, Cleaner and Greener initiative is intended to deliver environmental services on a local basis, and has provided a Rapid Response Unit to deal with issues such as fly tipping. The Environmental and Neighbourhoods Team and Joint Area Action Groups established with the Police and other local agencies all work to the same geographical boundaries. The Council remains an active participant in the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership.

The Safer, Cleaner and Greener initiative aims to improve outcomes for the community, including addressing perceptions of crime/fear of crime and improved street scene and waste management arrangements, through the Neighbourhood Teams, a Safer, Cleaner, and Greener Strategy, the adoption of the Essex Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy, and a new waste management contract with performance based payments and higher than statutorily required street cleansing standards.

The Council's new waste management contract is delivering steady improvements in street cleansing and continued increases in recycling performance. A Waste Management Partnership Board has been established to monitor performance against the contract and the delivery of service improvements, which are also monitored on a regular basis by the Director of Environment and Street Scene's senior management team. A new Customer Services Team within the Environment and Street Scene Directorate is providing much improved contact performance with residents, and a large scale residents' survey on the use of the waste service and views on prospective service changes and enhancements is currently being undertaken. The Council continues to foster a good partnership working with its waste management contractor, and participates fully in partnership working arrangements with Essex County Council and other waste collection authorities in Essex, through the Waste Management Advisory Board and Joint Committees (plus associated officer support teams).

The Council introduced its 'Home Option' Choice Based Lettings Scheme in November 2007, in order to

meet Government requirements that such a scheme should be in place by 2010 at the latest. Details of the scheme and its current performance are set out as a case study forming an appendix to this self-assessment.

A detailed corporate 'Value For Money Review' has been undertaken in order to explore the facts that underlie the views previously expressed by the Audit Commission on the provision of value for money (VFM) by the Council, through an analysis of information available from a variety of sources (including cost and performance data published by the Audit Commission), in order to reach an overall conclusion on the Council's provision of value for money. The purpose of the VFM Review was to:

- Examine and comment on the Council's costs and how they compare with other local authorities;
- Examine and comment on the Council's performance in respect of the performance data within the VFM Profile Tool;
- Reach conclusions on the Audit Commission's VFM assessment of the Council;
- Consider the nature and limitations of the comparative data, particularly issues that could significantly affect the data and the Council's ranking;
- Assess the authority's Council Tax levels, consider how they compare with other councils and consider the VFM provided by the Council from the 'citizen perspective'; and
- Consider the most cost effective future strategy to continuously improve value for money in terms of reduced costs, higher performance, or both.

As a result of the VFM Review, the Council will shortly be undertaking a thorough review of its existing Value For Money Strategy. As part of the VFM Review process, the authority has also updated its Value For Money Performance and Cost Analysis Tool. The Council recognises that it is important that it has a good understanding of the inter-relationship between its performance and costs, and that the authority uses this information to make sound strategic and policy decisions. The VFM Analysis Tool therefore seeks to compare the Council's performance in the main service areas using the former Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) and relevant Local Performance Indicators (LPIs), with unit costs and relevant benchmark information wherever possible, in order to develop proposals for action to improve VFM. The process identifies areas where further more detailed and targeted analysis may be required, which may then lead to corrective action or additional resource allocation. The results of the most recent analysis were considered by a Sub-Group of the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel



on 11 November 2008, and appropriate recommendations for further action were made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The VFM Analysis Tool is used as part of the Council's annual service planning processes in order to reduce costs.

The Council has also recently appointed its own Procurement Officer as part of the management restructure, in order to focus on achieving procurement best practice and identifying areas where the greatest benefits can be gained in terms of VFM and efficiency.

A presentation on health inequalities and the Essex wide report published in February 2008 by the Audit Commission and PKF (UK) LLP, was made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 November 2008, by the Director of Public Health of the West Essex Primary Care Trust. As a result, the Council intends to develop a local health inequalities action plan over the next year. The Council has also implemented an Active Health Project, comprising a four-year physical activity and health improvement programme that encourages people to participate in regular physical activity, and to educate them on the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle through mid-life and beyond. Details of the project are set out as a case study forming an appendix to this self-assessment.

The Council has embarked on a major consultation exercise in relation to the requirement to produce a Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan. Residents and stakeholders have been requested to respond as fully as possible to the issues raised by the consultation exercise in order to meet the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers, and options for future permanent and transit site provision. In view of the significant public interest in this issue, additional public accommodation has been made at the Civic Offices for the viewing of live webcasts of relevant meetings. The Council has also published website guidance for residents and stakeholders to ensure the validity of consultation responses, and is organising a training session for action/resident/community groups and town and parish councils in order to outline guidance for making effective representations.

The Council has undertaken a survey of local transport needs, in view of the difficulties that many people experience in accessing appropriate public transport and getting around the district. The survey was designed to help address transport needs, highlighting the types of service people require, who would use it, what they need, and how it would be managed, etc. The findings of the survey have been submitted to Essex County Council, and it is hoped that the County Council's relevant Portfolio Holder

will be able to attend a future meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to respond to the survey results and identify areas for future action.

In response to concerns regarding the average level of educational attainment at GCSE level in the district, in comparison to the results of other authorities across Essex, the Leader of the Council has met with the Essex County Council's Cabinet Member for Schools, Children and Families, the Epping Forest Secondary School Heads and the then Principal of Epping Forest College. As part of an ongoing dialogue that has developed from this initial meeting, the Leader has visited all of the secondary schools in the district in order to gain a greater level of understanding as to the particular issues that each school faces and to understand their future plans. The visits to the five schools were very informative and the level of commitment to provide the best opportunities possible for local young people was very evident. However, there remain considerable challenges for our schools, and options are being considered as to how best the Council could assist improvement, whilst accepting that the authority has no statutory responsibility for education matters. Generally all the schools have welcomed the development of ongoing dialogue to discuss issues of mutual concern.

The Council has previously recognised that it needed to improve its performance in meeting national targets for the determination of planning applications, which has also determined the level of Planning Delivery Grant awarded to the authority in recent years. A specific Task and Finish Panel established to consider the provision of value for money within the Council's planning functions has recently concluded that the Development Control function provides value for money. In terms of performance, an improvement plan for National Indicator 157 (Processing of planning applications as measured against national targets) has been prepared for 2008/09 and a review of the current frequency of Area Plans Sub-Committee meetings has had a positive effect on planning performance. The Council has committed considerable resources to the implementation of an integrated information and communications technology system to improve planning performance, and the rollout of an e-consultation system is currently the focus of system development.

#### **4. WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED TO DATE/IS BEING ACHIEVED?**

**This section of the self-assessment should report the Council's key achievements in the last year, with particular focus on outcomes and the impact for local people. Reference should be made to the progress that the Council has made in delivering its key improvement priorities, corporate priorities and national shared priorities.**

**The content of this section of the self-assessment will inform findings against KLoE 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 2.2**

Commentary	Evidence source
<p>The establishment of the Epping Forest Youth Council and its success in consultation and advocacy for the young people of the district is a key achievement for the Council. The work of the Youth Council over the last twelve months will culminate in the 'Big Youth Debate' on the 19 November, where a panel of key representatives of the statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as local Members of Parliament and Councillors will be questioned by an audience of young people. The 'Big Debate' follows a survey designed by the Youth Council that was recently completed by over 850 young people in the district, and intended to identify key issues for local young people and important local issues and services which affect their day-to-day lives.</p> <p>The Council's new waste management contract commenced in November 2007. The authority has achieved continued improvements in recycling levels, from 37.09% in 2006/07 to 41.67% in 2007/08. Recycling levels for 2008/09 are currently at or around 45.00%. Steady improvements in street cleansing standards have also been achieved, alongside a better understanding of the operation of the street cleansing standards methodology and improvements in telephone responses by Environment and Street Scene Customer Team.</p> <p>Decreasing levels of crime are being achieved within the district through the establishment of a new and enlarged Safer Communities Team, which includes the appointment of two new Anti-Social Behaviour Officers, closer working arrangements with the Police and the ability to task Police Community Support Officers. New arrangements have also been established within the Epping Forest Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership in order to provide focussed activity.</p> <p>The Council has secured the reaccreditation of the Investors In People (IIP) Standard, and has increased its investment in staff learning and development activity through a tailored Management Development Programme and the 'Springboard' Women's Development Programme. This additional investment and a re-focus on learning and development was specifically recognised in the successful IIP assessment in</p>	<p>The Big Youth Debate</p> <p>Final Report to Overview and Scrutiny 6 November 2009</p> <p>Cabinet Minutes (6.10.08)</p> <p>Webcasting Project Statistics</p>

March 2008. The second cohort of the Council's Management Development Programme commenced in late October 2008 and, as with the first programme, participants are involved in group based project work centered around securing improvements against a number of key national and local performance indicators where the Council is not currently performing to target.

The Council has adopted a Local Biodiversity Action Plan, building on previous work performed by the authority's Countrycare service and other local organisations. The Plan contains a five-year action plan to conserve and enhance biodiversity within the District, and to further promote community involvement. The Cabinet is to monitor progress against the action plan on an annual basis.

The Council's Contract Standing Orders and delegated authorities were updated and revised during 2007/08, as part of an annual review programme.

The Council remains active in seeking external funding to assist it to deliver its priorities at a lower cost, and has adopted an External Funding Strategy, the implementation of which is being led through an adopted action plan. The Council has recently secured external funding of £200,000 for the proposed development of playing fields at Ongar Leisure Centre as part of the Olympic 2012 legacy funding, and its success in securing external funding has been recognised previously. An internal audit of the authority's external funding arrangements has been completed.

The Council has continued to webcast its public meetings, including all major committees and the three area based planning subcommittees, some overview and scrutiny panels and the Audit and Governance Committee. In the year to August 2008 there has been an increase of 5,100 viewers of these webcasts, equating to a 29.5% increase in public viewing.

## **5. WHAT PLANS DOES THE COUNCIL HAVE FOR THE FUTURE?**

**This section of the self-assessment should report recent developments in the Council's plans for future improvement, including key plans or data sources accessible through the Council's website.**

**The content of this section of the self-assessment will inform findings against KLoE 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4**

Commentary	Evidence source
<p>The Council is a key participant in the second Local Area Agreement (LAA) for Essex, working with the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to achieve targets in agreed priority areas. The LSP has successfully bid for £453,000 of Performance Reward Grant monies from the LAA process to facilitate a range of local actions and initiatives.</p> <p>In order to improve access to services and improve response to enquiries, the Council has previously embarked on exploring the feasibility of a Customer Transformation Programme. The initiative was originally held in abeyance until such time as the affordability of the project could be assessed, given pressure on the Council's revenue budget and uncertainty around the cost of the new waste management contract. However, over the last year the authority's Medium Term Financial Forecast has become clearer and the customer services agenda has been revisited, to see where improvements can be practically achieved. The programme is being led by the Customer Transformation Task and Finish Panel.</p> <p>Improvement Plans have been developed for the majority of the Council's KPIs for 2008/09, progress against which will be reviewed and monitored by the Corporate Executive Forum (CEF). The focus of the Council's Performance and Development Review process has moved towards a performance management approach, and CEF has therefore recently agreed proposals for the alignment of the authority's business, budget, workforce planning and development processes into a clear framework to enable the Council to focus on key priorities, to improve performance and the way that performance is managed, and to improve communication and consultation on key priorities.</p> <p>The Council has fully revised and updated its Data Quality Strategy, to reflect previous recommendations of the Audit Commission and to reinforce the authority's corporate commitment to the use and provision of quality data. The review of the Data Quality Strategy has specifically resulted in improved arrangements for the checking and analysis of performance information.</p> <p>A major consultation exercise has recently been undertaken in respect of the Council's future waste management arrangements. The consultation exercise focused specifically on arrangements for the collection of 'organic waste', which should lead to further increases in the authority's recycling performance. Further changes to the waste management service are also likely in the medium-term, to</p>	<p>Local Area Agreement 2008-2011 - Performance Reward Grant Bids</p> <p>Report to Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee (17.11.08)</p> <p>Report to Corporate Executive Forum (5.11.08)</p> <p>Data Quality Strategy</p>

reflect the needs of the Essex Joint Waste Management Strategy, the achievement and maintenance of target performance, and addressing the recommendations of the Audit Commission following its 2008 inspection of the waste management service and the Encams action plan for street cleansing. A report and action plan to address the recommendations of the Audit Commission following its inspection of the Council's waste management services in May 2008, was considered by the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee on 17 November 2008.

The formal adoption of the Council's Safer, Cleaner and Greener Strategy will lead the delivery of this key initiative. The Council will also complete contract negotiations with SLM Ltd, its leisure management contractor, over the future of the leisure centres within the district, and will explore further joint working with Essex County Council in respect of the waste management service.

The Council has made limited progress on the development of action plans in relation to its existing Disability and Gender Equality Schemes. However, additional staff resources have recently been recruited to the Performance Improvement Unit and it is intended that significant progress in relation to all equality and diversity issues will be achieved over the next six months.

The East of England Plan requires formal 'joint or co-ordinated' working between the individual local authorities involved in the proposed urban extensions of Harlow, and a range of options for achieving such working are currently being explored.